

Imagine If You Were Running For Parent by Bonnie Harris

This month shares both the beginning of the new year and New Hampshire's primary election day. Both of these events embody hope, inspiration, change, and new beginnings. Let's, for the sake of argument, look at our families with these same elements.

Imagine that you were up for re-election as parent of your family! Would your children vote you, the incumbent, back into office if presented with a selection? If so what are the attributes you possess that give them faith in your ability to lead? If not, what would they be looking for in a new candidate?

Clearly familiarity, bonding, and family loyalty carry more weight than qualifications we look for in a political candidate. But I often ask parents, "If your child were here, and I asked him to describe his parents to me, what do you think he would say?" Then I ask the parent to be the child and answer the question. I ask you to do that now. How would your child describe you as a parent?

If you were running for re-election, would you make any changes or promises? Do you think you are the one best suited to lead your children? Imagine if you clearly stated your policies, standards, expectations, and values to make a case to your family why you were the best candidate. Imagine if you had to make a case for how you would provide what your children need in order for each of them to attain their best.

Your qualifications are solid. You are the incumbent after all. It is the rare child who would choose differently. But are you proud of your parenting? Is your child at his best under your guidance? Are you making tough decisions alone or with checks and balances in place to insure you are doing what is best for the family? Are your children cooperating with your leadership or demonstrating against your policies and practices?

Family leadership requires making decisions and creating policies that are for the good of the family, not simply an individual. You may present policies with which the individual disagrees. However, disagreeing with the authority and rebelling against it are two very different situations. Good leadership incorporates consistency, fairness, and logic that at least hear the desires of all even when one doesn't agree.

But protests, in the form of insubordination and resistance, signal dysfunction in the family system. When protests are not heard, rebellion and insurrection gain power. These demonstrations are different from inevitable disappointments and anger that soon disappear. When misbehavior is chronic and rebellion is in the air, change is needed from the higher ups. Negotiation and evaluation of policy are required. Protests need to be aired.

Go back to being in your child's shoes. What change would you like to see? As your child, how would you feel if your parents saw your resistance as a signal that

something is amiss and suggested making a change? What would it be like if you and your parents sat down to negotiate certain situations and you felt heard?

Dictators are afraid of change. Change could mean loss of power. They must remain in control. It's their way or the highway. They may accomplish things but their accomplishments are for their own good, not the good of the whole. If you are a dictator in your family, your children may choose the highway before they are old enough to have good judgment about the dangers of oncoming traffic.

Ineffective, weak leaders leave their constituents floundering on their own. They fear disappointing anyone, accomplish little, and create unrest. There is no one to lead and dissent often results. If you do not accept your own authority in your family, if you are afraid to make decisions that could result in your child's disappointment, your family lacks structure and leadership.

The good news is that you have the opportunity to change, because no one is threatening your position. The bad news is that since no one is running against you, you don't have to change a thing. You can continue the status quo, because you will always be the incumbent. So your choice is within yourself. Will you look to your next term as business as usual or as a new opportunity?

Imagine yourself as the parent you most want to be. Imagine being willing to let go of your fear and allowing the voices of your family to set a new path. Imagine taking hold of your authority, creating leadership, and establishing a family structure that creates hope and a desire for cooperation among constituents. Creating change requires determination, learning, and valued advisors. We fall into family patterns based on old patterns. To expand our vision, learn new ways, and take the blinders off is hard work but worth every step. Let's look to this new year, this new possibility for change, and let it inspire us rather than defeat us.